

Female Leadership in Public Religious Space: An Alternative Group of Women in Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The worldwide trend of emerging women-led religious reformist movements create the opportunity for Muslim women to emerge as religious leaders, the positions that have historically been held by men. This study has focused on a women's group, named the Group of Four Companions (GFC), working for renewal of faith among the Muslim women in a community in Bangladesh. The group claims a wing of Tablighi Jamaat (TJ)—an Islamic missionary movement originated in the 1920s, the largest Islamic piety movement with its global operation. However, GFC is not endorsed and recognized by the mainstream TJ for its relaxed gender restriction that enables women be organizers, leaders, and activists of the movement without men's presence. The ethnographic account of this study entails how the female Tablighis of GFC working as Islamic preachers, teachers, and guide within the womenfolk of a community are creating their own religious space and institution where they can reshape their personal understandings of Islam. This enables the emergence of new forms of female religious leadership not just on the basis of Islamic scholarly authority but also of the roles they play in mobilizing women in religious spheres outside of their domestic space. Although such women-led religious activity does not envision establishing an equal leadership opportunity for women like men, it places them in an unintended negotiation process with the restricted gendered norms of TJ and patriarchy in society.

Introduction

Tablighi Jamaat (Propagation Party/Group; TJ) is widely known in academic scholarship as an Islamic faith renewal and missionary movement originated in India. It is recognized as one of the largest Islamic reformist movements around the world, which aims to perfect Muslim life with moral and spiritual guidance of Islam. So far, scholarship focuses overwhelmingly on men's aspects of TJ activities (Masud, 2000; Ahmad, 1991) women's participation in this movement is being explored in a limited number of studies (Metcalf, 1998, 2000; Sikand, 1999). This study examines Muslim women's activities and the changing dynamics of gender role in TJ movement by taking into account an alternative form of Tablighi group of women—*Char Sathir Dal* (the Group of Four Companions; hereafter GFC) in a community in Bangladesh.

The GFC claims that it is a part of the transnational Islamic reformist movement of the Tablighi Jamaat, which is known as *Masturat Jamaat*. *Masturat* is a composite of two separate words: *mastura* and *aurat*. In Urdu, *mastura* (with its origin from Arabic) means hidden/unrevealed or chaste, and *aurat* generally refers to women. Thus, *masturat* refers to women with the connotative meaning that they should not be exposed or revealed to men as prescribed in Islam. *Masturat Jamaat* is the naming of female Tablighi Jamaat that upholds the notion of seclusion for Muslim women in the Tablighi movement. Throughout the study, I use female TJ which means *Masturat Jamaat*. Although men also participate in this *Jamaat* (group of people), it is primarily for facilitating women's activities in the movement under veiling and seclusion doctrine for women in Islam. It asserts that it is following same reformist ideology and method of TJ and that the only differences are the absence of male's participation and the leadership for guiding the female followers in the Tablighi activities. While TJ women work under the guidance of its male counterpart of TJ, the GFC is completely managed and led by female leaders. Leading female Tablighi activities without male participation and guidance is considered a violation of the principles of TJ; thus, Tablighi male leaders of the mainstream movement do not recognize the new female group as a branch of TJ, and they view this group's activities as *bidat* (from *bida'h*, reprehensible innovation that is not permitted according to established Islamic norms and practices). Despite mainstream TJ's critiques, the GFC's origin carries significance in Islamic studies—in particular, the visibility of Muslim women in public religious space invites us to reexamine the practice of gendered space of Islamic movement, which confined women to the home with a limited ability to engage in religious activities under men's authority.

So far, there is no detail study on the female TJ movement. In recent years, those who focused on women in TJ movement did

not pay attention to what made GFC distinct from the mainstream TJ movement. For instance, White (2010) and Ashraf and Camelia (2008) investigate women's empowerment and Islam by analyzing some cases of female Tablighi leaders (known as *amma huzur*, a title for showing reverence for their religious knowledge); however, they did not clearly distinguish whether their cases are taken from GFC or mainstream TJ. Their discussion about *amma huzur* and her activities in *Talim ghar* (house for religious lessons and prayers) suggest that they have taken their cases from GFC since mainstream TJ does not allow foundation of *Talim ghar* as a separate place for performing religious activities by women and for women in the community. Instead, the mainstream TJ prefers to organize religious lessons at a follower's house where neighborhood can attend.

This study examines the formation of the GFC as an alternative Tablighi group that does not adopt the restricted gendered norm of TJ—women's participation in TJ is always subject to participation of their unmarried male partners and kin. Considering the restricted gender norms in the established Tablighi movement for women, this study inquires how the GFC maintains the same ideology and method of TJ. Although, these women's activities are only performed in a limited space of other women, as discussed later; nevertheless, it carries significance, for it signals the transformation of the gendered space of Islamic movement and of the leadership in religious sphere.

The ethnographic account discusses the activities of both GFC and TJ women's groups and argues that the women of the GFC are in process of leading an Islamic missionary movement that was historically controlled by males. It illustrates the activities of the GFC in *Talim ghar* (the house for lessons), a place where the female Tablighi followers perform various Islamic rituals. Traditionally, men used to perform these rituals in public religious spaces and institutions whereas women performing the rituals outside of their home were not common phenomena. I analyzed *Talim ghar* not just as a place for preaching Tablighi lesson but also as a mosque-like institution and community space for women and by women. In this out-of-home space, the female Tablighi followers, as I contend, engage with Islam as well as with other familial and social matters that affect their lives. The out-of-home involvement with Tablighi movement or, more broadly, with religion inadvertently leads to the evolution of new forms of female leadership, not just based on Islamic scholarly authority but also of how women become capable with engaging religion in out-of-home. I shall illustrate the way the female religious leaders engage in out of home activities represent them as active agent while it also restores women's subordinate status.

The argument of the study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two phases in 2011 and 2013 among the followers of both TJ and GFC in two different locations in Bangladesh. I observed the activities of TJ based on a women's reading circle in Rajshahi, a metropolitan city located in the northern part of Bangladesh. For the GFC, I have conducted fieldwork in Gaibandha, a district town in the northern part of Bangladesh. For understanding female leadership role through GFC activities, I use one case that represents women-led and women-only Tablighi activities in other areas too. The GFC in Gaibandha is evolved through interaction with GFC activities in Bogra district. While doing fieldwork in another city, such as in Rajshahi and Dhaka, I came to know that GFC is also operating there. Moreover, in earlier studies (White, 2010), the case taken from GFC (though it is not mentioned) is working in Dinajpur district. It means that the female religious leadership is an emerging phenomenon in Bangladesh. The GFC's case in Gaibandha helps understand women's initiatives in response to the restricted gender norms in TJ and in religion as well. The rules of TJ and the gender norms in religious life in Bangladeshi society are essentially similar. Therefore, exploring a case is helpful to understand the changing gendered tradition of religious practices and movement of TJ.

This article consists four parts. In first section, I shall discuss the similarities and difference between TJ and GFC. Second, I shall discuss the dominant discourse of leadership in Islam. Third, I shall make an ethnographic description of the case of GFC activities comparing with TJ activities for women. Fourth part analyzes emerging nature of female religious leadership of GFC and their engagement in the process of negotiation with patriarchy. Finally the concluding remark will be summarized in conclusion.

1. TJ and GFC: Similarities and Differences

Women's participation in Tablighi reform movement was promoted as equally important as the men's, and women's participation in TJ which known as *Masturat Jamaat* was evolved in the 1940s, several years after the formation of TJ for men, to spread the same agenda of individual reform of women. TJ promotes a shared gender responsibility between men and women in order to achieve success in its faith renewal and reform mission, but the methods of male and female activities are different (Metcalf, 1998). TJ women are encouraged to work with men and to do activities under male guidance. This twofold ideology of TJ's 'share gender responsibility' but 'with male dependence' might be seen as an opportunity for some women to organize in different ways and to move toward forming a separate religious group.

One of the central aspects of Tablighi reformism is *dawa*. The word *dawa* literally means 'to call' or 'to invite' people, particularly in Islamic sense, or from the perspective of the TJ movement, *dawa* is used to call people to the right path of Islam. Tablighi *dawa* emphasizes on 'enjoining good and forbidding evil'. TJ organizes its *dawa* mission following the method of

travelling with a group or *Jamaat* tour from one place to another. Usually, a group of five to ten people travel from one place to another, stay at a mosque in a community and call on Muslims to return to perfect Muslim life guided by Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. People engage in this kind of missionary tour for 3 days, 10 days, 40 days, and even for one year. The Tablighi project of individual moral reform is embedded in the *Jamaat* tour in which one cultivates Islamic faith through repetitive performance of Islamic rituals and engaging in missionary activities. If one led his life in accordance with Islamic principles, then other people, to whom Tablighi men will preach the message of Islam, will become impressed and would seek to follow true Islam themselves. Individual reform is the central theme of Tablighi revivalism (Masud, 2000; Sikand 2002).

In association with TJ activities for women, the GFC designs its *dawa* activities. I shall discuss the activities of the two groups. As a woman-led group, the GFC is doing the same activities as TJ with some extended functions. As decision-making power is in the hands of women, some change occurs in structure, space and leadership in the GFC. Moreover, in order to gain public recognition as well as to reach large groups of people, the GFC introduces some new activities that bring women into new roles in religious movements. Women's collective performances have transformed the cultural meaning of religious rituals. Women's religious space will be well understood through this transformation of women's religious roles. In following part, I shall discuss the core activities of both group of TJ and GFC such as; *Talim*, *Jamaat tour* and *Mashwara*.

***Talim*:** Both of these two groups arrange a weekly *Talim* or reading circle or Islamic lessons, which the women from the neighborhood join. The number of participants in the regular *Talim* of both groups is almost same—approximately 20-30 women join regularly. The same reading material in listed Tablighi books is read in both types of *Talim* sessions. The only difference is the place of performing *Talim* and the decision of forming a reading circle. In the case of TJ, *Talim* is arranged inside the home of a female Tablighi follower, while the GFC group uses a separate *Talim ghar* (house for Islamic lessons). The members of the GFC contribute money to build a *Talim ghar*, which is used for multiple purposes, such as reading and interpreting religious texts, meetings, hosting the *Jamaat* tour and prayer. In case of the GFC, the *sura* (governing body made by regular female members) decides and regulates the *Talim*, while in case of TJ, it is totally guided by male Tablighi members from the local mosque. In addition to reading Tablighi books, the GFC emphasizes regular practice of Quran reading.

In the case of TJ, the female Tablighi are committed to their neighborhood *Talim*. They are not allowed to visit another *Talim* to give a speech. The GFC followers visit several *Talim* and give speeches to encourage women in their reformist mission. In contrast, TJ requires women to stay at home and practice their knowledge to create an Islamic environment at home and in a limited space. The GFC members believe that if the women do not reach out to other women with *dawa*, then expecting women's reform in masses is absurd. Like the male Tablighi, the GFC followers visit different *Talim*, where they give speeches among the gatherings to encourage others to engage in Tablighi reformism.

***Jamaat tour*:** One of the core components of TJ activities for women is participation in the *Jamaat*/group tour. Five to ten pairs of men and women join in the *Jamaat* tour. When the *Jamaat* team reaches a destination the male Tablighi followers stays at the mosque and the female in a house of a local Tablighi. One male is selected as *amir* (leader) for the whole group and women are enjoined to obey the male leader's decision. Like TJ, the GFC also arranges a *Jamaat* tour and visits neighboring places. The *Jamaat* is formed only by the female members. During the period of the *Jamaat* tour, they stay in *Talim ghar*, or in some cases where *Talim ghar* is not yet built, women stay in a local Tablighi follower's house. According to the head of the group, mostly during the month of *Ramadan* they arrange a *Jamaat* tour where more than 20-30 women join.

***Mashwara*:** It means meeting, consultation or discussion. Tablighi followers take part in *mashwara* to precede their activities. Like TJ, the GFC also maintains this principle. Since TJ has no constitution, decisions are taken in *mashwara*. All Tablighi members are enjoined to take part in *mashwara*, held in a mosque. TJ does not allow women's participation in *mashwara*. If a TJ woman has any query, then she informs her male relative of it and the man relays the message to the male elders in *mashwara*. Female Tablighi women are enjoined to do work according to the male *mashwara* and they are strictly prohibited from doing Tablighi works according to their own initiative. In contrast, the GFC members attend *mashwara* in *Talim ghar* weekly. The followers are encouraged to join in the regular meeting. However, not all members join regularly in this meeting, but the *sura* members must participate. The GFC has a *sura* that consists of ten regular members who are assigned for conducting the activities in different areas and are encouraged to report in the meeting. All members may express their arguments in meetings. Compared with TJ, the GFC group does not believe in a hierarchy of status—all members are considered equal. However, *amir* is considered an authority in TJ and all must obey him (Hasani, 1989). In the case of the GFC, there is no *amir*; however, the head of the group, Ayesa, is recognized as the leader of the GFC. Without her participation, no decision is made in the GFC.

Therefore, similar activities of TJ are performed by the GFC, and it suggests that female-led organizations have the ability to organize and lead Islamic religious group separately beyond male guidance. It creates a new opportunity for the GFC followers to engage in new roles. However, when the women perform similar religious activities like men, which is challenging for them, they become more conscious to perform them well. They become active in legitimizing their activities among the community. Thus, this

encourages the GFC followers not to limit their activities according to the gendered norm of defined roles of women in TJ; rather, they expand their activities, which I will discuss in next part.

2. Changing Dynamics of Female Religious Leadership in Modern Period

Conventionally, religious leadership is conceived in relation to religious authority. Examples of religious leadership that hold some form of authority include Sufi master, *alim* (Islamic scholar), caliph, prayer leaders of mosque, legal scholars etc.⁽¹⁾ All the authoritative leadership positions have largely been held by male. In the modern period, leadership and authority in Islam tends to move from conventional forms and functions. “more and more groups and individuals are claiming the right to speak on Islam and in the name of Islam” (Kramer and Schmidtke, 2006: 12). Expansion of mass education and Islamic knowledge and the emergence of ‘free market of religious thought’ create opportunity for individual Muslims for their independent engagement with religion (Esposito and Mogahed, 2007: 55). This changing dynamics in religion, in particular, in modern period is marked with increasing participation of Muslim women in those religious spaces, forums, institutions, and movements where they have long been near-invisible. Recently, in many parts of the world, particularly in Middle East, the female leaders are speaking publicly for Islam and they are working as Islamic preachers, teachers, interpreters of Islamic text, the jobs that were specialized for men. In this changing context, scholars recognize religion as an “institution in this man’s world where women can exercise some control and autonomy and can gain some recognition for their efforts” (Williams and Vashi, 2007: 272), and this contention somewhat poses question against the critiques of secular feminists who view Islamization as a project that ramifies Muslim women’s oppression in the name of religion. The shift from the restricted female participation in Islamic institutions (such as mosque) or in religious spaces in out-of-home provides Muslim women the opportunity to lead religious activities and institutions and sense of empowerment and solidarity (Spielhaus, 2012)

In this study, I conceptualize female religious leadership in an extended sense. Religious leadership as interlinked to authority is often seen in relation to scholarly abilities to perform certain religious activities such as preaching, teaching, interpreting religious texts, leading worship, and providing guidance on religious matters (Kalmbach 2012). The female Tablighi followers to whom I conduct fieldwork involve with all these kinds of religious activities despite their limited scholarly authority in Islam. The leadership, as I illustrated later, is also formed or, at least, seems to be formed, through the abilities of creating and managing religious space for womenfolk in the community. The pious Tablighi women not only conscious to reconstruct themselves but foster to construct Muslim community through inviting other women who are thought still apart from the true path of Islam. The notion of self-responsibility encourages women to be active by their own efforts and without men’s leadership and guidance. When the women take the responsibility of performing collective religious rituals, they create some space for religious agency in public (Frisk, 2009). As argued later, the women are leading religious rituals not like male leaders but according to their personal understanding of Islam, which is figured out as ‘women’s Islam’ (Ahmed, 1999). In absence of men, through their participation in religious gathering and leading religious rituals the women are constructing the ideas of faith in ways that sustain and dignify their actions and allow a sense of well-being and agency (Torab, 1996).

3. The case of GFC

3.1 The GFC Group in Gaibandha

This group claims that it has been named the ‘Group of *Char Sathi* (Four Companions)’ because in the early days of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad took part in Islamic preaching with his four spiritual Companions, who were popularly known as caliphates. Following the path of the Prophet, the women created the Group of Four Companions and introduced women’s collective activities by engaging as a group.

The GFC group has been established in Bangladesh in the 1980s. Like TJ activities for women, the GFC also started its journey from the capital city of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and spread across the country through women’s networks. The GFC group in Gaibandha, where I did my fieldwork, emerged through its network in Bogra, another district in Bangladesh. According to the head of the group, Ayesa⁽²⁾, (a 45-year-old woman living in Gaibandha who teaches at a college) started her journey of forming a separate Islamic religious group in her hometown in Gaibandha in the 1990s. Before starting it in Gaibandha, she followed the GFC in Bogra, where she lived and worked in public service. During her stay in Bogra, she realized the scarcity of Islamic knowledge among the women of her hometown and started to visit Gaibandha once a week in order to preach Islamic lessons to women. Finally, she decided to quit her job in Bogra and started to introduce the GFC activities with more efforts in Gaibandha.

At the initial stage of fieldwork, I focus on two aspects. The first aspect concerns why the GFC claims it is ideologically similar to *Masturat Jamaat* but is an alternative form. Second, I focus on the very essential factual context of organizing a separate

group composed of only women. Following the two questions, I try to understand the background of the emerging GFC in Bangladesh. In response to the question of defining the difference between the GFC and female TJ, the head of the group, Ayesa, outlines the distinction in the following way:

GFC is not an opponent of *Masturat Jamaat*. Its purpose and goal of increasing Islamic religiosity and ‘making ideal women’ are similar to *Masturat Jamaat*, only the method of doing activities is different. *Masturat Jamaat* works by attaching them with male *mahrem*⁽⁵⁾, while our Tablighi followers perform their duties without any male partner. Truly speaking, this group emerged in the context of the limitations of the restricted rule of *mahrem* male.

This narrative indicates that the group’s vision of Islamization is neither entirely identical to nor different from *Masturat Jamaat*; as mentioned earlier, individual reform is the central theme of Tablighi revivalism, and the GFC poses the same ideology. Making Muslim women pious and returning them to daily rituals practices are the main agenda of the GFC; it is completely apolitical and has no secular agenda. Ideologically, these two groups have no difference. Thus, that the group claims itself as an alternative group of *Masturat Jamaat* is a nominal distinction.

As a transnational movement, according to recent studies, TJ is ‘by far and the largest’ but ‘probably the least known’ religious movement in contemporary Bangladesh (Ahmed and Naznin, 1990:799). The annual gathering of TJ, known as *Biswajitema*, depicts the growing popularity of this transnational movement in Bangladesh. The *ijtema* in Bangladesh is reported to be the second largest gathering of Muslims anywhere in the world, after *Haji* (Sikand, 2012). The growing popularity of TJ encourages members of the GFC to follow this particular Islamic reformist movement and the agenda of TJ was recognized as suitable for them to return to the true path of Islam. The head of the group, Ayesa states,

I was graduate student at a modern university when I first encountered a *Masturat Jamaat*, which visited in Rajshahi (a district located in the northern part of Bangladesh) from a foreign country, Canada. A Tablighi man of this *Jamaat* gave his religious speech at a women’s gathering. I was so impressed that, for the first time in my life, I recognized I should be a true Muslim. As a Muslim, I should engage myself in Islamic preaching.

This early experience of following TJ and affection to Tablighi ideology of creating a perfect Muslim life attracted Ayesa to join in the revivalist movement. How does TJ suggest women become involved in this faith renewal movement? According to the Tablighi ideology, as its founder Muhammad Ilyas states, doing Tablighis not only the duty of *ulama* and *sufis*; rather, it is the duty of all Muslims—men as well as women—to engage in Islamic preaching (Sikand, 2002). This narrative may create a sense of individual responsibility among the pious women that is observed among the followers of the GFC, who simultaneously express their wish to engage in Tablighi. Merina (a regular member of the GFC and 45 year-old, housewife who lives in Gaibandha) explains her wish of performing Islamic reformism in the following way:

We, as the followers of last Prophet Muhammad, it is our duty to disseminate His messages to all Muslims. Here, He never made any category between men and women. If we refrain from obeying His order, just think, how we will response to Allah hereafter?

Then, she continues the discussion with respect to her modesty:

I do not have vast religious knowledge, but what I believe is that I should provide my knowledge to others who have a need for it. Now, I feel happy that I reach so many women who are Muslim in name even if they do not know the *kalima* (faith of Islam) well.

Finally, she confidently said,

The structure of TJ allows women’s participation, only when their male relatives are with them; thus, there is no scope for us because our male relatives still are not ready for the Tablighi works. So, should we limit ourselves to the home until our male relatives’ engage in TJ? Will the men respond to Allah on our behalf?

The narrative clearly addresses the pious woman’s sense of self-responsibility to attend Islamic preaching and the desire for resisting the core principle of the *mahrem* male in TJ. Therefore, TJ is playing a twofold role for women. It encourages women to join in Tablighi activities like their male counterparts, but they are only allowed with attachment of their male relatives. In such ideological complexity, the pious women, who have no *mahrem* male relatives to accompany them in this movement, organize in a different way. The GFC’s origin has been understood in this complex context of male dependence of TJ. According to the head of the group in Gaibandha, the GFC has been spreading its network across the country. This study observes that the group has expanded across the Gaibandha districts, and even in rural areas, the women of this group are very active.

3.2 Constructing *Talim* House as a Women’s Mosque

In addition to the common activities (discussed above), the GFC has expanded its activities through establishing a permanent place, which is named *Talim ghar* (*Talim* house); the efforts might be seen a way to reach out to and gain acceptance among women

in the community. The strategy of making a permanent *Talim ghar* is a technique to bring similarity between TJ and the GFC, but at the same time, it might be seen as a means of recognizing the new group in the community. As the TJ movement is based in the mosque and has no formal organization, Tablighi activities are regulated from mosque. TJ activities for women are regulated and decided in the mosque by the male Tablighi. Similarly, based on the Tablighi idea of regulating religious movement based in the mosque, the GFC has essentially felt the need to create a permanent place that will serve as their center of regulating Islamic activism. Because the idea of a women's mosque remains unpopular in Bangladesh, the GFC has established the concept of building a permanent *Talim ghar*, which will serve as a female mosque, a center for engaging in the ritual of prayer and housing the group's activities. The GFC concept of *Talim ghar* identifies it as a female mosque, where women can gather for individual and collective praying as well as for performing GFC activities. Like the male members of TJ, the GFC group uses *Talim ghar* for the same purposes—praying, hosting the *Jamaat* group and doing *mashwara*. In such a way, the GFC, as an emerging female-led group, introduces the idea of creating women's own space through which they will regulate the Islamic movement. This group has made several *Talim* houses in neighboring areas of the Gaibandha district, and those houses serve as local mosques to them.

How does the *Talim* house serve as a mosque to the community if it is not like a real mosque? Its structural shape is not like the mosque; it looks like a single house. There is no system of announcement for calling on women at collective prayers (*Athan*). The *Talim* house does not arrange any collective prayers or even Friday prayer (known as *Jumah* prayer), except for the occasional collective prayers during the period of *Eid*, *Sab-e Barat* and *Sab-e Qadr* (known as holy night for Muslims). Usually, a mosque means there is an *Imam* (leader of prayer), but the *Talim* house has no female *Imam*. Actually, this *Talim* house, as women's mosque, will be well understood by the term 'women's mosque just like home', as used by Jaschok (2012: 44). However, the recent development of emerging women's mosques in Middle Eastern countries, which has been well attended by the recent work of anthropologists (Mahmood, 2005; Frisk, 2009), show that female mosques are, in most cases, part of male mosques. Males lead the collective prayers, while women are recommended to attend from behind a curtain or wall. Mostly, women's mosques are used for preaching, listening, and Quran learning rather than taking daily prayers. Despite the growing development of women's accessibility in mosques, it is considered as "male's domain" (Lehmann, 2012:505). This means that the concept of the women's separate mosque is still seen as contesting with the dominant and traditional idea of the men's mosque.

The same thing is happening in Bangladesh, where the concept of the separate women's mosque is still prohibited. Women take part in male mosque and perform rituals of praying under male leadership. Still, it is an urban-based practice hardly seen in rural areas. In the global and local context of Bangladesh, the GFC's *Talim* house might be considered as a praying place for women, which is 'just like home'. Although its structure is similar to that of a home, the performing of rituals inside the *Talim* house have given it recognition it as a female mosque among the community women.

3.3 Performances of Rituals in the Talim House

The *Talim* house seems like a sanctified place among the pious women. As they view it as a sacred place, the women clean themselves by performing ablution (performing of *odhu*) before entering the house. They enter the room leaving their shoes in outside. They cover their body properly, talk slowly and engage in religious performance. The women refrain from unnecessary talking and instead engage in *zikr* (chanting Allah) or reading the Quran or other religious books. Performing rituals denotes that the *Talim* house is a holy place for them. As they believe the *Talim* house is their mosque, they link it with the traditional thought of using the mosque as a place for Islamic teaching for women. Historically, it is a common nature of the mosque to hold a Quran teaching class. The *Talim* house is no different from that. It also has a regular Quran teaching class where the female Tablighi engage in teaching. The children and women participate in this class. During my fieldwork, I observed that approximately 25 children and middle-aged women took part in this Quran teaching class, which is held every day in the early morning. Three female Tablighi took turns teaching the students, a service that is provided at no cost. The female teachers believe that they will be rewarded in the hereafter for their roles in Islamic teaching. In the *Talim* house, women emerge as Islamic teachers, while previously, in the mosque, the male *hujur* (Islamic teacher) performed this role. In general, the children were the students of this class. Since female teachers teach in the *Talim* house, many middle-aged women also take part in this class.

One important implication of the *Talim house* among the community women is arranging collective prayers during the time of *Ramadan*. At this time, the prayer of *Terawi* (additional night prayer during *Ramadan*) is arranged for the women from the neighborhood. Moreover, collective prayers for celebrating two annual festivals of Muslims (*Eid-ul-Azha* and *Eid-ul-Fitr*) are also arranged in the *Talim* house. According to the female Tablighi, more than a hundred women participate in these special prayers. She claims that the new tradition of women's *Eid* prayer was introduced in local community for first time by the GFC. In the early years, the participant rate was very poor in these collective prayers, and although the GFC followers only joined in last 3-4 years, the participant rate has increased. This means that the *Talim* house as a women's mosque is becoming accepted in the local community. While, male participation in *Eid* prayer in and out of home is seen as obligatory and women are recommended to pray

alone at home, the new practice of women's collective *Eid* prayer at the *Talim* house is said to bring a change in cultural tradition. In the early morning of *Eid* day, it was common for the men to attire traditional Islamic dress and go out of the home to pray. However, in the *Talim* house recently, women are also seen going out of their home to perform the *Eid* prayer. After prayer, they exchange the *Eid* greeting among themselves. In such a way, the *Talim* house, as a symbol of a mosque, is changing the meaning of traditional Islamic cultural values and norms. The ritual of women's prayer, which was thought to be a performance of seclusion, performed alone at home, has become a ritual performed at women's gatherings out of the home.

During my fieldwork, many female Tablighis mentioned that it is their mosque. This is clearly understood when the *Talim* house is used by the devoted women for performing the ritual of *itikaf* (devotional seclusion). Over the years, performing of the ritual of *itikaf* was limited only to men, as they could stay at the mosque, but in the *Talim* house, the women are able to engage in this ritual too. The observance of *itikaf* means individual engagement in religious performance at the mosque for a certain period, remaining in a state of seclusion. Usually, the ritual is performed for the last 10 days of *Ramadan*, when *Sab-e-Qadr* (night of power) is sought. During the period of performing the rituals of *itikaf*, men/women strictly abstain from going outside the mosque. Mostly, he/she engages in performing rituals, such as optional prayers (*nafl* prayer), Quran reading, *zikr* and performance of long *dua* (supplication). Therefore, the performing of religious rituals itself makes the *Talim* house a women's mosque among the local community.

3.4 *Talim* House as a Community Property

As the *Talim* house is valued as a sacred place to the devoted women, collective responsibility is observed in take caring it. During my fieldwork, I observed that the GFC women made hard physical and financial efforts to construct the *Talim* house. At the beginning of the GFC in Gaibandha, it started its journey in a *Talim* house, which was made by traditional material of wood and tin and lasted for 20 years. Following the development of the GFC activities, the members decided to construct a four-storied building. A devoted member of this group (Ayesa's mother) donated a piece of land to build this house, and the followers are now collecting donations to construct the house. The construction work has started, but it requires huge costs, and followers are seen collecting money. Collecting money and providing donations for this purpose are thought of as both sacred and beneficial for the hereafter. Merina, one GFC member, explained: "I collected 50 thousand taka (Bangladeshi currency) from my own areas for building this house. It will be an *Allah'r ghar* (room for Allah) where women can attend prayers"⁽⁴⁾. How the poor followers donate money for constructing a *Talim* house is remarkable and reflects their deep religious motivation for the GFC. During my fieldwork in Boali, (a village under Gaibandha district), I observed that the followers, most of whom are very poor, donated their collection of *mustir chal* (handful of rice) for constructing the *Talim* house. Through the hard efforts given by the devoted GFC followers, the *Talim* house is constructed as a community property. It is open to all Muslim women, who recognize it as their own. *Talim* house, although it is not like a real mosque, is recognized as a female space in the religious sphere, built by collective efforts and serving as a place for the performance of religious activities, particularly the rituals of prayer.

3.5. Unveil the Private Matters in *Talim ghar*

Religious gathering in *Talim* house, opens a space for women to engage in talking about women's affairs. During my fieldwork, I observed that in religious gatherings of the *Talim* house, the women often engage in talking about women's daily affairs, central of this discussion is domestic violence. For example, Masuda, a devoted follower of the GFC, shared her personal life experience. She states,

My husband used to beat me regularly and once I decided to commit suicide, but fortunately I met with Ayesa at that time. She suggested me to keep patience. Following her suggestion, I joined in GFC and found peace in my life. Now I am very busy in GFC.

Masuda's case of facing domestic violence is not an uncommon phenomenon for many women who live in a patriarchic society in which men enjoy higher social status and prestige than women. However, in addition to Islamic activism, the social relationships and interactions among the GFC members make women more conscious about their life experiences such as violence and other forms of oppressive behavior towards them. While remembering her past family life, Masuda realized that if she were clever, like what she is now, she would not have had to face domestic violence in her family life. She felt that now she is cleverer than before because of her association with GFC, social relationships, and networks with the other women. Masuda, including other women in *Talim ghar* mention that their attachment in women's network has increased their status and voice in family. Their opinion in decision-making is increasing and is valued by their men partners at home.

Therefore, the *Talim* house, to some extent, might be considered as a development of women's space in the Islamic sphere. How it is working to transform gendered roles in Islamic movement? Does the *Talim* house create female leadership in the Islamic sphere? Do the female leaders struggle to resist the unequal gender status for women in the Islamic sphere? All these questions are

necessary to understand how the women are performing their roles in order to secure and develop their space. These questions are analyzed in the next section.

4. Female Religious Leadership is in Negotiation with Patriarchy

Muslim women are creating their own autonomous and independent associations and groups in Middle Eastern countries as well as in Western countries, which has been well attended by anthropologists. When the women take the role of leading revivalist groups or leading collective religious rituals, it seems like the development of female religious leadership. The recent development of women emerging as Islamic preachers and Islamic teachers—as religious leaders—and entering into the core religious spaces such as mosques and leading religious institutions and groups, which might be seen as a potential subversion of male domination of religious leadership. In spite of the growing development, anthropologists have shown that the religious authority of these women is often limited. Discussing the Dutch Muslim women's separate group, Dessing (2012), argued that even though Muslim women in the Netherlands organize in many ways and are more active than before, their scope of obtaining and exercising religious authority is limited. In her detailed ethnographic study, she mentions that the majority of female leaders in the mosque-based group in the Netherlands exercise authority based on their traditional training, knowledge and expertise. These women are respected in their community at large, but their authority remains limited only to women. Scholars have examined the reasons of limiting female religious leadership and argue that the performance of religious leadership depends not only on obtaining religious knowledge but also on particular social and religious norms and values which influence to legitimize religious authority. As Kalmbach, mentions that female religious leadership is not only dependent on their activities and the roles they play; rather, female religious authority is often limited due to the gendered restrictions or longstanding traditions of society (Kalmbach, 2012). This study analyzes the scope and nature of female religious leadership of the GFC group from social perspective of where the women live.

Ayesa, the head of the GFC, represents herself as a female religious leader because of her outstanding performance in leading the group. The presence of *Talim ghar* and performances inside the space help her to be a leader among the women of the community. She holds the same characteristics as a man for becoming a religious leader. An analysis of the factors shaping Ayesa's strong bond with her followers suggests that the success of gaining loyalty requires multiple qualities, such as religious knowledge, expression of Islamic piety, communication skills, modesty, and sound managerial expertise. All such qualities are observed in Ayesa. She is 45 years old, married and comes from a middle class family. She is engaged in a public profession of teaching in a general education institute. Her academic background is modern education, and she does not have any formal degree from Islamic institutions like the *ulama*. Nevertheless, she has substantial knowledge about the Quran and Hadith and knowledge of popular Islamic texts. During my fieldwork in different *Talim* houses, I observed that when she delivers her speech to the women gathered, she frequently uses the Quranic verses to make her speech authentic. Her religious speech is desired in the women's gathering. Not only she is a good speaker but she is also known as a good woman due to her modesty and generous attitudes. The audience, members of women gatherings mention that she has no pride and respects women from all classes. Moreover, her personal signs of piety encourage many women to be modern as well as Islamic. For urban neighborhood women, as revealed by Rausch's work in Morocco (Rausch, 2012) and Bano's work in Pakistan (2012), Ayesa's act might be seen as model of personal piety in modern times. She is in Islamic dress constantly, and her presence in public attracts many urban women who are engaged in public. It does not mean that she is ignoring the Islamic values of women's seclusion or rules of covering. In such cases, her stand is strategic—she never forces anyone into complete conformity with the rules of seclusion, but in her speech, she mentions the reward of seclusion in the hereafter. Finally, her communication skills and behavior with the people of all classes establishes her as a common member of her group. Despite her social hierarchical status as a higher-educated woman and employee, she used to take food in the same plate as her fellows, which is the practice of TJ. Her ignorance to social hierarchy, modesty, and good behaviors impresses the common people. Ayesa is addressed as the mother of the group, which expresses her recognition as a leader of the whole group.

However, despite Ayesa's popularity and leadership roles in the GFC, she still does not claim to be a female religious leader like her male counterpart. She strongly believes that women cannot be *Imam* or *amir* (leader) like men. According to her, the role of *Imam* is particularly assigned for men; thus, women should not struggle to obtain the status. Despite leading the collective prayers of *Eid*, she refrains from performing as an Imam, which might be seen as expression of obeying the Islamic doctrine of religious authority against the backdrop of some practical reasons.

A multiplicity of related factors, such as different approaches to textual sources, traditions, and culture, as well as internalization of specific gender roles, impact the gender-sensitive issues such as the right of female religious Leader's works to shape female religious leadership. Moreover, the experience of performing religious authority, which was always a male domain, works to guide the female leadership. Additionally, the concept of gender equality and feminism are criticized and are portrayed as foreign, hegemonic, and therefore inauthentic, intrusions into local culture contribute to shaping the notion of female religious

leadership (Kalmbach, 2012).

Although Ayesa has deep knowledge of the Quran, hadith, and popular Islamic texts, she still feels lacking in Islamic knowledge. It may be her secular education background that prevents her from subverting the dominant model of Islamic authority, although she partly resists men's interpretation of Islam. During her interview with me, she politely mentions,

I lead the GFC activities according to my poor knowledge of Islam and I don't know much like the *ulama*. But I believe the basic principles of Islam; it is the duty of all Muslims, men and women, to worship Allah. All Muslims, men and women, have the right to practice all Islamic rituals in which men and women are not separated.

Ayesa's narrative clearly states her respect for Islamic scholars and, at the same time, her resistance to men's interpretation of women's right to embrace religious roles. Ayesa believes women's rights are fully ordained in Islam but that they are deprived. She believes that Ayesha (Prophet's wife) is the role model of her life. During her speech, she frequently mentions the example of the Prophet's wife Ayesha (*RA*), who is recognized as a religious authority in Islam. Referring the Islamic text of Hadith, she mentions that there are many hadiths, which are collected from Ayesha, and the Prophet's companions frequently visited to her after the death of Prophet when they faced any complexity. Ayesha's story is used as example to the GFC women, who struggle to reestablish women's greater right in the religious sphere. Ayesa's struggles for expanding wider religious rights for women must be understood within the Islamic framework rather than the secular idea of gender equality. Her views are similar to the new Islamic feminists who are struggling to establish greater religious roles for women according to holy text. The recent feminist scholars such as Aisha Abd al-Rahman, Nimmat Siddqi in Egypt promote an ideology of women's Islamic movement that is 'truly Islamic' and 'truly feminist'. They argue that neither immodest dress, nor identical roles for the sexes in the name of modernity, nor sexual segregation and seclusion of women should be mandated in the name of Islam. The right is the one that combines modesty, responsibility and integration into public life with the Quranic and naturally enjoined injunctions between the sexes. (Moghadam, 1993). Ayesa never demands that she be recognized as a feminist leader and strongly criticizes the secular agenda of gender equality. She enjoins her followers not to expose themselves in public without any reason and stresses the importance Islamic dress. Although her statements seem to reflect conservative attitudes of women's seclusion, alternatively, it can be viewed as an expression of her spiritual piousness. Likely, Ayesa's attitude of refraining from observing the role of *Imam* is an expression of her piousness, which is developed within Islamic framework.

Ayesa's desired religious leadership based on Islamic doctrine is also strengthened by the tradition and culture of local society. Ayesa's particular desire will be well understood by the process of social and cultural construction of desire. Mahmood (2001), in her detailed ethnography of women's mosques in Egypt, discusses that the female's desires are always socially constructed and different types of desires emerge in different social contexts. Ayesa's particular desire develops in her local, social and cultural context. As I already mentioned that GFC activities are not recognized by mainstream TJ, the male elders strictly criticize the group's activities as *Bidat*. According to a male Tablighi elder,

travelling in *Jamaat* without *mahrem* is totally *bedeeni* (un-Islamic). Proper *deen* (Islam) will never come in the un-Islamic way. The aim of travelling in the *Jamaat* tour is not simply to increase the movement, but rather to establish practice of *Sunnah*.⁽⁵⁾ (Hossain, 2007: 19).

Because of central non-recognition of the GFC, Ayesa faces a continuous threat from the local leaders of TJ in Gaibandha. She mentioned that at the beginning of the GFC, the male *ulama* of the local community pressured her to stop the group's activities. Even the male clerics of the local mosque announce her name and mention her group as illegal. She is also under pressure from her community members. Some of the well-educated women in local community, who have no affiliation with TJ, criticize the GFC activities as a violation of Islamic rule, especially the performance of religious rituals such as praying, *zikh*, *dua* (supplication) at the *Talim* house. A local woman Minara,⁽⁶⁾ who lives near the *Talim* house of Ayesa in Gaibandha mentions,

Allah clearly outlines women's performance of rituals at home with seclusion and strictly prohibits woman from being an *Imam*. Recently, different religious groups are emerging, which are trying to interpret Islam according to their personal understanding, which is a complete violation of Islamic rules.

This narrative indicates that Ayesa is constantly facing threats from her opponent group TJ as well as from some community people. This continuous feeling of anxiety may compel the GFC leader to emulate the authorized models of religious leadership rather than subvert it.

Moreover, in the local context of Bangladesh, the GFC activities led by females are seen not only as a violation of Islamic rules of gender but also as a resistance to the long-standing tradition and cultural practices of gender. In Bangladeshi society, the patriarchal norms are continuously cultivated through the practice of unequal gender norms, and the male is recognized as the guardian of women in both the private and public spheres. As is recognized in different studies (Hussain, 2010; Naher, 2010), men and women of all classes hold that patriarchal values are deeply rooted in the society of Bangladesh. For Ayesa and other women

of her group, it is a common feature of their daily lives to face gender inequality. Most of the women whom I encountered in my fieldwork have shared how they continuously face domestic violence from members of the opposite sex in their family. Although Ayesa leads a women's group, she mentions that she always informs her husband before going outside to engage in Tablighi activities. She mentions that her husband knows about the places she usually visits. This reflects the cultural practice of women's obedience to their husbands and reveals the dominant tradition of male guardianship over females in the family. The practices show the embedded social system of gender inequality in society, which is faced by all women, including Tablighi, in their daily lives. Although the recent situation of women in Bangladeshi society has been changing and various development projects have been undertaken to reduce gender inequality, it is still deeply embedded in society. As Kabeer (1999) mentions, gender equality and women's empowerment are important for the state's Millennium Development Goal (MDG), and various development projects for women are being undertaken, but their implementation is disappointing. In this social context, although the female leader of the GFC forms separate group and leads religious activities independently without male control, she does not intend to struggle for obtaining equal rights.

In the complexity of an unequal social context in many Muslim countries, the authority of female religious leaders is seen as linked to the subordinate role of women and dependence on male authority (Jeffery, et. al, 2012, Dessing 2012). Ayesa's leadership, which is developed based on her own efforts, does not directly make her subordinate to and dependent on male leadership; rather, her position on gender ideology reflects that she is in the process of developing leadership through the negotiation with the patriarchic tradition in Islam. Ayesa decides her stand, which is strategically instrumental; she arranges the collective prayers of *Eid* at her *Talim* house. To some extent, she instructs the prayer, but it is not like the performance of a male *Imam*. While the male *Imam*, standing in a certain place, leads the prayer for the group of men who stand behind him, Ayesa leads the prayer standing in the same row with the other women. She shows that women can instruct religious rituals like men but in different ways, which will not be contradictory to the authorized model of male leadership of praying. Ayesa's position of female leadership is strategically similar to Halima Krausen. German Muslim leader Halima Krausen has consciously chosen to avoid the leadership of prayers so that she can instead expand her influence impact and authority within communities that reject female leadership of prayers (Spielhaus, 2012).

Although Ayesa's strategic stand may not represent her female religious authority as similar to a male's, it has significant social value nevertheless. It increases her social status among the women. Because of her religious knowledge, she enjoys the position of Islamic teacher, which increases her status among other women in her community. Engagement in religious movement increases women's social status. The GFC women, to some extent, are known as perfect among the community. The ordinary women like to call on them to perform the essential ritual of washing the dead body of a woman in the community. When a woman dies, her relatives contact with them and request that they perform the sacred ritual.

Furthermore, the most important aspect of Ayesa's leadership is her increased status among the men's circle. Ayesa, as a preacher, is invited by local males to provide religious speeches, although the audience is limited to women. During my fieldwork, I observed that a local elite man, who is a member of TJ (although TJ does not allow the GFC), invites Ayesa and other members of her group to give a speech to the women of his local community. The man arranged a place at his house where women from the neighborhood areas could gather and attend the speech given by Ayesa. The man provided transportation and offered food to the GFC followers. In such a way, religious engagement in the GFC and collective performances in *Talim ghar* have increased Ayesa's and other women's status among both the women and the men of the local community. Therefore, recognition of Ayesa's leadership does not stem from her involvement in leading, performing, and guiding certain religious activities among the womenfolk. Rather, the meaning of her leadership is shaped through the social recognition she receives for her efforts to making other women conscious about their self-responsibility in religion.

However, in spite of increased status among local community, some may argue that the female religious leaders of GFC have less implication in altering the socio-cultural hierarchical status in Bangladesh. Obviously, the way in which the female leaders of GFC engage in religious activities show that they are in the process of negotiation with long standing patriarchic tradition, rather than subverting it. By resisting men's dominance in TJ movement, GFC leaders have created new religious group for women and have organized similar activities of TJ, while they also deliberately negotiate with the dominant gender norms of men's authority to legitimize and recognize their group in community. Female religious leader's involvement in the process of negotiation and dominance does not alter the dominant gender structure that suggests men's higher status in Islamic movement. Nevertheless, their collective agency and establishment of female space have represented them as active agent in Islamization process, therefore, they are respected among the community people.

Conclusion:

This study reveals that female religious leadership among Muslim women, though limited among womenfolk, evolved through the changing dynamics of women's involvement in religious movement like TJ. Muslim women whose religious performance and observance are conventionally limited to home begin to perform religious activities like men in outside of home through their involvement in women-only Tablighi Jamaat movement. By not obeying the strict gendered norm of the mainstream TJ, the GFC provides more flexible, informal, and volunteer opportunity for those women who opt for engaging with religion in and outside of their community by their own choices. This empowers them, at least, as an active religious agent. On the other hand, participation in a women-only TJ movement denotes the action of feminine consciousness against male dominance in religious sphere. Women's separate religious institution such as *Talim ghar* as created by them inadvertently put them against the dominant discourse of divided gender roles in religious sphere (Vanderwaeren, 2012). Despite the absence of a deliberate vision to alter the longstanding gender practice in public religious sphere, their participation in the GFC as an alternative Tablighi group help them negotiate not just with the restricted gender norm of the mainstream Tablighi Jamaat but also with the patriarchic social structure and cultural context. As we have seen, the women's religious gatherings unveil the private matters (such as domestic violence) in public discussion. Through group discussion and sharing personal experiences, the women may reconfigure the gender relation in family often by transforming male partners' attitudes towards them and their activities. In this sense, women become active both as religious and social agents, by their involvement in the TJ movement, rather than remaining as passive victims of male authority.

Endnotes

- ⁽¹⁾ For details about female leadership and religious authority, please see Kalmbach (2008).
⁽²⁾ The names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
⁽³⁾ *Mahrem* male refers to permitted and unmarried male relatives according to Islamic rule. For example, father, brother, maternal grandfather, maternal uncle are known as *mahrem* relatives for women.
⁽⁴⁾ Interview of Merina, a 45-year-old woman and housewife who lives in Gaibandha. She is a regular member of the GFC. I took her interview in the *Talim* house.
⁽⁵⁾ Mawlana Saad, a *Sura* (governing body of TJ) member of the world Headquarter of TJ, New Delhi. For details of his speech, see Hossain, 2007 :19.
⁽⁶⁾ Minara is a 45-years-old woman living in Gaibandha. She is a general educated woman and engages in a public job. She is relative of Ayesa. Minara views GFC activities as bogus.

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